7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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527 are seen putting off the shore and
501 steering their course homewards.

527 The custom of making swings on
526 Ascension Day, is very common in Malta, especially among the country people. In almost every village, lots of women and children may be seen swinging together and singing merrily on the day of *Lapsi*.

527 No reason could perhaps be assigned
173 by the Maltese for the practice of celebrating *Lapsi* by parties and picnics on the water, and for making swings, except that they follow the custom of their ancestors.

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St. JOHN'S EVE

Not unlike other nations, the Maltese are not indifferent in celebrating

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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the Nativity of St. John by kindling great fires in the public streets, and giving their children dolls to carry in their arms on this day, in order to make good the prophecy respecting the Baptist "*Multi in nativitatae ejus gaudebunt*". 796 372 857

Days and even weeks before this festival, groups of children are seen going out into the country fields to gather straw, twigs and all sorts of other combustibles which they store up for St. John's eve.

On the night of the 23rd. of June, the day before the festival of the Saint, great fires are kindled in the streets, squares, and market places of the towns and villages of the Island, and as fire after fire blazes out of the darkness of that summer night, the effect is singularly striking. 796 372

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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796 These fires are sometimes kept up
• 372 for hours, being continually fed by the scores of by-standers who take great delight in throwing amidst the flames some old rickety piece of furniture which they consider as lumber in their houses. Lots of happy and reckless children, and very often men, are seen merrily leaping in succession over and through the crackling flames (*).

796 At the time of the Order of St.
372 John of Jerusalem, the Grand Master
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[194] (*) Leaping over the fires is mentioned among the superstitious rites used at the *Palilia* feasts, instituted in honour of *Pales* the goddess of shepherds, (in the calends of May) in Ovidius's Fasti.

" Moxque per ardentes stipulae crepitantis acervos
Traijcias celeri strenua membra pede "

The learned Moresin appears to have been of opinion that the custom of leaping over these fires is a vestige of the ordeal, where to be able to pass through fires with safety, was held to be an indication of innocence.

7: Busuttil 1, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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himself, soon after the *Angelus* used to leave his palace, accompanied by the Grand Prior, the Bishop, and two bailiffs, to set fire to some pitch barrels which were placed for the occasion in the square facing the sacred Hospital.

Great crowds used to assemble here in order to assist at this ceremony. The setting ablaze of the five casks, and later on, of the 8 casks, (*), by the Grand Master, was a signal for the others to kindle their fires in the different parts of the town.

Various opinions are entertained by antiquarian writers with regard to the origin of these fires on St. John's eve.

From the account given by Jakob Grimm in his "Deutsche Mythologie" p. p. 583, 593, it would appear that

(*) Eight being the languages of the Order.

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the great blaze reserved for the eve of the feast of the nativity of St. John the Baptist on the 23rd. of June, is observed with similar rites in every country of Europe.

The kindling of the fire, the leaping over or through the flames clearly show that these rites are essentially of heathen origin. They are obviously connected with the worship of the sun, and were doubtless practised long before the Baptist was born. In old heathen times the summer and winter solstices were the two greatest and most widespread festivals in Europe.

These fires—says another writer—are evidently a remnant of the ancient Beal fires of the Druids, at the *Beil* time, which was at the beginning of May. But why do they chiefly occur on the night before the festival of the

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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Saint, instead of the old period of *Beil* time which was the beginning of May? —I do not believe that a satisfactory explanation of these circumstances has yet been given by any of the antiquaries. It was perhaps to transfer the practice or custom of lighting these fires from a Pagan to a Christian object.

The Nativity of St. John the Baptist was a great and solemn festival of the Church, like those of the other great festivals of Martyrs, the eve or vigil of it was, in the early ages, commemorated with appropriated ceremonies. The public devotions were kept up all night in the churches, of which the Saint was the patron, and the solemnities of the next day were ushered in amongst types and figures appropriate to the occasion. Amongst these was probably introduced a large and

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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unusual exhibition of lights to typify the Baptist who, in the Gospel, is called by the Saviour himself "A burning shining Light." What could have been more natural than that the early Christian Authorities would have directed the people to light their anniversary fires on the eve of this Saint, and thus give to the national custom a Christian instead of a Pagan significance? To this feeling, most likely is due the transfer of the fires to the 23rd. of June and, perhaps too, this perpetuation to this day amongst the people.

Gebelin, in his "Allegories Orientales" accounts in the following manner for the custom of making fires on Midsummer Eve.

"Can one" says he "omit to mention here the St. John's fires, those sacred fires kindled about midnight, on the

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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very moment of the solstices, by the greatest part of ancient as well as of modern nations—a religious ceremony of the most remote antiquity which was observed for the prosperity of states and people and to dispel every kind of evil? The origin of this fire which is still retained by so many nations, though enveloped in the mist of antiquity, is very simple. It was a *Feu de joie*, kindled the very moment the year began; for the first of all years, and the most ancient that we know of, began at this month of June, hence the very name of this month, *Junior* meaning the youngest, which is renewed; while that of the preceding one is May, *Major*, meaning the ancient. Thus the one was the month of young people whilst the other belonged to old men.

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7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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These *feu de joie* were accompanied, at the same time, with vows and sacrifices for the prosperity of the people and the fruits of the earth.

They danced also round this fire, and the most active leaped over it. Each on departing took a fire brand, and the remains were scattered to the wind, which at the same time that it dispersed the ashes, was thought to expel every evil. When after a long train of years, the year ceased to commence at this solstice, the custom of making these fires, at this time, was still continued by force of habit. Besides it would have been a sad thing to have deprived the people of a day of joy in times when there were not many of them, thus the custom has been continued and handed down to us."

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
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Dr. Milner is of opinion that the fires lighted up all over the continent, on the eve of the 24th. of June, are not intended as the idolatrous worship of the sun or *Baal*, the Philistine God of fire, but in honour of Christ's precursor, as alluding to his character of bearing witness to the light (John i. 7) and of his being himself a bright and shining light (John V, 35).

In conclusion, it would appear as certain, that the fires of St. John's eve were intended to typify the Saint by an exhibition of light.

Formerly the feast of St. John (24th. of June) was very popular in Malta. It ranked with that of SS. Peter and Paul, celebrated at Notabile on the 29th of the same month.

The number of people that flocked to Valletta from all parts of the Island,

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or trumpets. Before the corpse was interred, a pillow filled with orange and laurel leaves (*) was placed under the head, and a carpet spread over the tomb, which was suffered to remain some days, to show that during that time it was forbidden to walk over it.

No fire was lighted for three days in the kitchen of the deceased, and either one of the relations or some most intimate friend sent a dinner to the inhabitants of the house, which they ate cross-legged on the floor.

Women on this occasion remained forty days in the house, but men went out on the seventh day, with their faces unshaven. (†)

(*) Orange trees were regarded by the Pagans as expiatory.

(†) Mourning among the ancients was expressed by very different signs; such as by rending of garments, wearing sack cloth, laying aside crowns &c. Thus Plutarch, in his life of Cato, relates, that from the time of his leaving the city with Pompey, he neither shaved his head, nor, as usual, wore his crown or garland.

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THE SWEETHEART'S BARGAIN

In the marriage contract, they have it for a pact,
That he takes her to the Feste and sets her on a wall.
That he buys her cakes of sweetmeat, of the sort with hempseed made.
For that's the kind of sweetmeat a bride likes best of all.

It is believed that such a clause used actually to be embodied in the written contract drawn up by the parents and the go-between.

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Each little hamlet has its own feast, in honour of its own particular patron. Each has its own peculiar forms. Of the national feasts that of St. John naturally occupies a place of considerable importance. Certain aspects of its celebration, however, indicate that the Order of St. John was not alone responsible for the enthusiasm which this saint inspires. Busuttil, who has already been quoted at some length, writes of the Feast of St. John as follows:

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"Not unlike other nations, the Maltese are not indifferent in celebrating the Nativity of St. John by kindling great fires in the public streets, and giving their children dolls to carry in their arms on this day, in order to make good the prophecy respecting the Baptist 'Multi in nativitate ejus gaudebunt.'

Days and even weeks before this festival groups of children are seen going out into the country fields to gather straw, twigs, and all sorts of other combustibles which they store up for St. John's Eve.

On the night of June 23rd, the day before the festival of the Saint, great fires are kindled in the streets, squares, and market places of the towns and villages of the Island, and as fire after fire blazes out of the darkness of that summer night, the effect is singularly striking.

These fires are sometimes kept up for hours, being

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continually fed by the scores of by-standers who take great delight in throwing amidst the flames some old rickety piece of furniture which they consider as lumber in their houses. Lots of happy and reckless children, and very often men, are seen merrily leaping in succession over and through the crackling flames."[1]

At the time of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, the Grand Master himself, soon after the *Angelus*, used to leave his palace, accompanied by the Grand Prior, the Bishop and two bailiffs, to set fire to some pitch barrels which were placed for the occasion in the square facing the sacred hospital.

Great crowds used to assemble here in order to assist at this ceremony. The setting ablaze of the five casks, and later on, of the eight casks,[2] by the Grand Master, was a signal for the others to kindle their fires in the different parts of the town.

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It is of some interest to compare the Maltese account with the following notes on English Midsummer customs which appeared in the *Radio Times* recently under the signature of Felix Felton, compere of so many excellent folklore broadcasts:

> "Midsummer's Eve is also St. John's Eve. . . . Sermons on that day used to be preached out of doors in the quadrangle of Magdalen College, Oxford, 'that the preaching might more nearly resemble that of John the Baptist in the wilderness'; and bonfires were lighted in various parts of the country, 'betokennynge that Saint Johan was a lanterne of light to the people.' Then comes a collection of curious legends and superstitions connected with certain herbs. The legends attribute to these all kinds of magical powers; women, it is said, can tell by hempseed[1] who their husband is to be; and in Shropshire it was believed that those who failed to hang up St. John's Wort outside their doors would suffer by their cows going dry and their hens refusing to lay. Finally come the Midsummer's Eve revels and festivals—the old London processions, the revels at Penzance, the gatherings at Stonehenge, and the bonfire festivities still held to-day. . . .
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> As varied as the customs themselves are the possible

[1] Compare the reference to hempseed in "The Sweetheart's Bargain."

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explanations of them. Two kinds of explanations have to be treated with some caution, the local one and the Christian one . . . and we shall find ourselves going back for the true causes to the worship of the sun and of the seasons. 796 171

The revel, easily degenerating into the brawl, has always found opposition, as in the thunderous verse of an old poet who branded the Midsummer processions as

> Of Edinburgh the great idolatrie
> And manifest abomination.

Other forces have militated against them besides the disapproval of the austere. As another old writer has rather obscurely remarked: 'No suffimen is a greater fugator of phantosmes than gunpowder.' Other such fugators are periods of increased popular education and of quickened pace in national life. These forces have been active enough in our own times, and few Midsummer customs have survived them; but all of them were originally the spontaneous outcome of certain impulses in the make-up of human beings, and thus, past or present, they are of permanent interest to us."

There seems little doubt that the Night of Fires belongs to that very early civilization of which, as has been suggested elsewhere, the Maltese are amongst the direct descendants. What more appropriate than the adaptation of these ancient fires to the honour of that Saint beneath whose banner there happened all that is most valiant in Maltese history? 372 796 174

In one form or another practically all the "seasonal" customs familiar in other countries appear in Malta: All Fools' Day, with its affinity to the Hindu festival of Huli; May Day, when the children gather green bows in honour of Flora; New Year's Day, when lime is strewn on doorsteps in token of good luck; but Malta's most popular holiday is the period of Carnival. Its 796 [527] [171]

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763 The fratelli
794 —lay brethren of the congregation—hurry from their homes to take their places in the procession of the Viatecum. Marching rapidly, like a company of soldiers, headed by a peasant ringing a staccato, commanding bell, some bearing tapers, some censers, all chanting the prayers for the dying, they pass [793] quickly through the village street. Under a canopy, borne by two sturdy *fratelli*, goes the priest in his bright vestments, bearing God to the dying man.

The women hurry to place a light in their windows, kneel and pray as God passes.

So, with such poor pomp as these simple folk can muster,
764 the Prince of Peace comes to dying Zeppu. The funeral rites
[171] and customs differ hardly at all nowadays from those of other Catholic countries. But Zeppu's grandfather could remember a time when the Old Things were much in evidence.

764 There were the "Wailing Women" (whose name *neuuieha*
767 survives in the sense of "one who constantly complains"). They wore long black robes, and chanted death-songs whose burden was a combination of praise for the deceased's virtues and rebuke for his having left them. They cut the vines from the courtyard, overturned the furniture, broke pottery, and mixed the fragments with soot and ashes, staining the doors [302] of the bereaved house with the mixture. They cut pieces of their hair and scattered them over the coffin.

765 If the dead man possessed horses, cows, goats, all their tails
[262] had pieces cut from them in token of mourning. There was a
[764] form of "wake" where funeral cakes and boiled wheat were eaten. A carpet was spread over the tomb to prevent the unware from treading on it.

[372] No fire was lit in the house for three days after the funeral.
[302] The women kept to the house for forty days. The men, having remained indoors for seven days, went unshaven.

764 Here are clear signs of the most primitive funeral rites
174 and *taboos*. Death was a pollution—hence the segregation of